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ABSTRACT

This is a historical study of the emergence of feminist rhetoric in the South. Feminism in the United States is associated with the abolition movement for it was the disaffected delegates to the World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 who, after being refused participation in that conference because they were women, organized the Seneca Falls Conference in 1848, the first of a series of conventions from which gradually evolved the woman's rights movement in the United States. Southern women were reluctant to embrace such a movement identified with the abolition movement, and after the war reconstruction was a primary motive at first. The commitment to feminism of Southern women, initially relatively few in number, derived from their concern for the welfare of those who had traditionally been their responsibility. Through involvement in women's service clubs and WCTU, organizations which also provided respectability for the woman speaker, Southern women entered the political arena to support suffrage. Only through the political equality of the sexes could Southern women secure "the good" of society. Theirs was a rhetoric of justice--justice not so much for themselves as for those entrusted to their care. (MKM)

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Southern Feminist Rhetoric: A Search for its Roots

Feminism, "the theory, cult, or practice of those who advocate such legal and social changes as will establish political, economic, and social equality of the sexes,"[1] has been institutionalized in the United States for over a hundred years. Its roots, moreover, are cosmopolitan. The History of Woman Suffrage identified the World Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840 as "the first great turning point in the evolution of the women's rights movement."[2] It was at this meeting that women delegates from the United States who were refused participation in the conference realized their position to be no more secure than that of the slaves they sought to protect.

In 1848, disaffected delegates organized the famous Seneca Falls Conference, the first of a series of conventions from which gradually evolved the woman's rights movement in the United States. Particularly significant was the Declaration of Sentiments drafted by this conference which insisted on rights and privileges belonging to women as rightful citizens of the United States.[3]

Southern women were reluctant to embrace such a movement. Its identification with Abolition was anathema; its tenets were often inconsistent with the "Southern Lady" image pervasive in and emulated by all strata in southern society. Further, there were more pressing priorities. For the South, there was war and its aftermath. Devastation pervaded the land. "Women's rights" were secondary motives, not primary ones--at least initially. The southern road to feminism took a more circuitous route.

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The post Civil War South was a "new" and uncharted world for its inhabitants. Women--by mere reason of their survival--were thrust into economic roles for which their background had not prepared them and against which the political system discriminated. Widows became large landowners. Yet they had no voice in taxation and were, in some instances, barred from disposing of their property either by sale or by will. Women were entering the labor force, but a lack of training and a dearth of jobs limited their options. Further, the southern woman, on whom had rested in the antebellum years major responsibility for socialization and for the physical and spiritual welfare of society, had few economic resources and no political power on which to draw.

Agrarian women sought remedy through Grange, Alliance and Populist organizations which offered constructive programs of reform and encouraged the participation of women. The "Southern Lady" -- to use Anne Firor Scott's term of delineation[4] -- worked through missionary societies, women's clubs, temperance societies, child labor organizations, education and sociological conferences and ultimately suffrage organizations. Frustration over social conditions and the apathy, arrogance and/or inaction of those in power emphasized women's own political impotence. The vote became, then, not so much a "right" as a necessity.

As this analysis suggests, the early women's rights movement in the South was not a direct descendant of its northern counterpart. Neither was the southern movement rooted in intellectualism. It came rather as a response to social consciousness and economic deprivation.

And, as historians Francis Butler Simpkins and James Welch Patton concluded, "out of the ruins of the defeated Confederacy there arose many hopeful and forward-looking women who were destined to have a vital part in creating the civilization of the New South."[5] By the 1890's, these women were moving--in large measure--toward feminism through involvement in the suffrage movement. Or, to put it another way, it was in the suffrage movement that feminism came to be institutionalized in the South.

The leadership of the suffrage movement in the South derived largely from daughters of the planter-aristocracy.[6] Though Ann Firor Scott has traced the journey from pedestal to politics, some attention to woman's role and her "place" in life seems essential to this analysis.

Scarlett O'Hara notwithstanding, the world of the antebellum southern "lady" was no big soiree. Plantation life was hard and grueling and woman's responsibility extended far beyond the parlor and the bedroom. Mistress not only of her own family, but of an entire plantation community, the southern woman assumed responsibility for the physical, spiritual, and cultural well-being of her charges. She settled disputes, meted out discipline, presided over the sick room, and, at times, the classroom. As "keeper of the keys," she managed the stores, counted the silver and doled out rations. For those entrusted to her care, she represented security and continuity.

The chaos and devastation wrought by war did not diminish woman's role as "overseer of the general welfare."[7] Out of adversity

emerged new opportunities for service, the result being an expansion of woman's "keeping" role to the larger society. Alice Ames Winter, President of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, aptly described role perception for many southern women in the post-war period. As Winter characterized her, this woman was

> . . . a home woman who has found that she cannot isolate her home from her community. Government and social and health conditions invade its sanctuary, and in order to protect her brood she must go out from its walls for part of her time and do her best to make government and social order and physical conditions as fine as possible, that they may upbuild and not destroy.[8]

Or, as North Carolina activist Sallie Sims Southall Cotten put it, "After her own home was clean, she wished for a clean town."[9]

Underlying this "caring" or "keeping" role was patent paternalism articulated as "noblisse oblige." The children, the elderly, the servants, the "unfortunates" (the blind, insane, poor) -- these were woman's charges, and her responsibility to them and for them extended into all areas save economic security.

The religious orientation of the southern woman buttressed her "caring" role and provided direction for action. The church provided an early forum for the discussion of social issues and a public platform for women. Not that all churches approved, of course. The essentially conservative theology of the southern clergy questioned bringing social concerns within the framework of religion. Moreover, the inflamatory question of women speaking in church reared its head. Tradition frowned upon such a practice. Besides, St. Paul had forbidden it! But women managed and maneuvered. Some attacked the issue

directly. Georgian Rebecca Latimer Felton took on both Baptists and Presbyterians on the issue, responding particularly to the Pauline argument. Her husband, a United States Congressman, felt called upon to defend her honor for such a position in the pages of the Atlanta Constitution.[10] Such was the ferocity of the conflict.

Some women were able to identify ministers sympathetic to the social gospel who not only allowed them the use of their pulpits, but encouraged their activities. More often, however, southern women organized adjunct societies, associations and circles whose concerns centered on "missionary" or other benevolent activities. Sunday schools and charity leagues also provided outlets and forums. So long as women concentrated on the heathen of the foreign fields, their efforts were lauded. But as women's religious groups directed more of their interests toward "home missions" -- settlement houses, prison reform, homes for wayward girls, child labor and like social issues -- their activities became suspect. Baptists sanctioned participation in various benevolent causes and the temperance movement only "as long as these efforts remain dissociated from the feminist agitation and politics."[11] The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, went so far as to abolish the Women's Board of Missions and brought the entire missions effort under a general board where women's activities could be closely supervised.

The wedge that made the church more accessible to women as a forum and their social programs more acceptable as "causes" was the

temperance issue. From the pulpit, women spoke to male and female audiences. In their temperance unions, moreover, they examined diverse areas of social reform. A popular cause in the South, temperance also provided "respectabilitity" for women speakers. Further, the issue of temperance yielded broader forums for women. Women spoke not only in churches, but in town halls, hotel ballrooms, public auditoriums, on the streets and in private homes. They distributed pamphlets, wrote letters to editors, engaged in personal lobbying and appeared before legislatures. Their efforts did not go unnoticed by the crowds they drew, the editors who covered their activities, or the politicians they sought to influence.

As women worked within institutionalized religion to further their causes and ultimately themselves, they also made juncture with the popular educational movement sweeping the country. Southern women founded literary and culture clubs which gave members opportunities for writing and speaking. Though initially both learned papers and debates dealt primarily with literary topics, by the turn of the century the primary emphasis of these organizations shifted to education and philanthropy. In Alabama, for example, "projects" included traveling libraries, scholarships and kindergartens. Through its legislative committee, the State Federation actively supported legislation involving education such as admission of women to the state university (1903) and local taxation for public schools (1910). It also lobbied for child labor laws (1903), prohibition (1903), juvenile courts (1905, 1906), and conservation (1905, 1910).

Women came to be attuned to their own potential and the statutory laws which limited it. In 1903, at the Tuscaloosa, Alabama convention, a Mrs. George P. Bondurant of Birmingham lectured on "Alabama Laws Relating to Women." By 1914, Mrs. Littleberry James Haley, Alabama state president, was able to proclaim with some authority:

> The woman's club is a social force--first, because it develops the individual woman; second, because its influence is felt in family life; and third, because it furnishes a common meeting ground for all women.
>
> The woman's club is a civic force--first because it helps to mould public opinion; second, because it influences legislation; and third, because it is directly responsible for much civic improvement.[12]

The women's club movement in the South did have effect--both on society and on the women themselves. The local clubs were distinctly "southern" phenomena, having "grown out of the combination of old culture patterns of the South and new conditions of the South."[13] The movement attracted women of high caliber, moreover, and gained respectability by operating within an "acceptable" context for women. Sallie Cotten attributed recognition of the North Carolina Federation's influence in "the uplift of the state" to the fact that "its women are sane as well as progressive."[14] In reporting the 1900 state convention of the Alabama Federation, the Birmingham News editorialized: It "has within its membership the most intelligent and the most advanced women in the state."[15] But above all, wrote Margaret Nell Price, historian of the Women's Club Movement in the South,

> The great significance of clubs and organizations has been the provision of means for women to exert influence, to grow in freedom and ability to meet new needs and problems in ways

> adapted to modern conditions, and to enable women to participate in public affairs while performing the duties of wifehood and motherhood.[16]

Southern women did not restrict their reform activities to "ladies' clubs." They served on hospital boards, aligned themselves with education associations, and entered the fight for child labor laws. Women participated at the decision-making level in sectional conferences including the Southern Sociological Congresses and the annual meetings of the Conference on Education in the South. Women emerged as major spokespersons, moreover, for the programs espoused by these associations.

Southern women labored individually as well as through movements to remedy social ills. Sisters Kate and Jean Gordon, New Orleans reformers, for example, pursued differing though not conflicting courses of action. Jean wished to ameliorate specific problems and worked for child labor legislation, a factory safety bill, day nurseries, a consumer's league, and better care for and treatment of the mentally ill. Kate, on the other hand, believing that woman's emancipation would bring an uplifting of all society, directed most of her efforts toward securing the right to vote. Historian L. E. Zimmerman summarized their influence:

> Closely associated in their work, though at times differing in emphasis, the two sisters took the lead in New Orleans in awakening the sense of social responsibility among middle class women that was a feature of Progressive reform in major cities throughout the nation.[17]

The "awakening of social responsibility" did not, however, relieve specific inequities; neither did prohibition laws, nor did education which women supported with a "veritable passion." With the political

leverage provided by the vote, perhaps women could provide a better life for those entrusted to their "care."

Initially, at least, suffrage lacked the respectability accorded temperance and education as a solution to social problems. As Belle Kearney, a Mississippi reformer, admitted, "I had to broach the work tentatively."[18] Yet to many, extending the franchise to women seemed the only way to insure a better world. Elizabeth Saxon, Louisiana suffragette, argued before a Congressional commitee in Washington, "I never realized the importance of this cause, until we were beaten back on every side in the work of reform."[19] Lee Norcross Allen, historian of the Alabama movement, traced State President Patti Ruffner Jacobs' interest in suffrage "in part to frustration over the recent defeat of a state prohibition amendment, in part to a concern with the evils of child labor."[20] Rebecca Henry Hayes, first President of the Texas Equal Rights Association, viewed the vote as "a weapon, a power, a force whereby we may realize the highest form of self-government."[21] Yet she did not expect miracles. "I do not believe that the enfranchisement of women will bring about an instantaneous radical change in the condition of political, social, or religious affairs," she said, "but it is a move in the right direction."[22]

Southern suffragettes conducted campaigns, both at the state and national levels. Women appeared before southern constitutional conventions and were granted hearings. Fearing that she could not be heard, New Orleans activist Caroline Merrick had asked her son-in-law to read her speech before the Louisiana convention delegates. "But

Mrs. Saxon said: 'You do not wish a man to represent you at the polls; represent yourself now, if you only stand up and move your lips.' 'I will, 'I said. 'You are right.'"[23] Women also lobbied on a person-to-person basis. Seeking state amendments from state legislatures, a federal amendment from Congress and the ratification of the federal amendment from state legislatures, women spoke to committees and to full house assemblies.

Agitation for the ballot called into question fundamental "southern" notions about woman's "place," the status of the Negro, and the concept of male supremacy with its accompanying doctrine of chivalry. The rhetoric of southern suffragists adapted to these issues. One group went so far as to build their entire case on states' rights. So opposed to federal intervention was Kate Gordon, for example, that she "without hesitation joined the forces which had consistently opposed woman suffrage and worked to prevent ratification in Louisiana and Mississippi."[24] Such philosophical predispositions prevented the movement in the South from assuming the shape of the northern demand for equal rights and opportunities with men--at least temporarily.

> It rather worked along the channels already worn by the older Southern society; at first, through the demand for broader and more thorough education for the new generation of girls; next, the assumption of a more decided influence in the church; then a deep interest in the moral purification of society through the temperance reformation, and a final push towards the capture of a class of industries hitherto unknown to or neglected by the sex.[25]

Where, then, may one find the roots of southern feminist rhetoric? Its philosophical base seems to have developed out of woman's role and

her commitment to the "care" of others. Though some southern women were prodded into suffrage because of specific--and often personal--injustices (particularly discriminatory laws regarding property ownership and taxation), most saw in the ballot an opportunity to reform the world. Suffragette Lila Meade Valentine, for example, was careful to clarify that her advocacy "stemmed from no feeling of persecution or militancy."[26]

Women increased their intellectual stock, moreover, through their participation in the women's club movement, their exposure to materials distributed through national movements for child labor, temperance and suffrage, and through their involvement in conferences and congresses. Northern speakers who arranged southern tours were notably influential. Caroline Merrick, first president of the New Orleans Temperance Association, came to the movement "not from deep conviction of duty on the temperance question," but because of "the inspirations of Frances Willard's convictions."[27]

Belle Kearney claimed for the WCTU a pivotal place in the development of the women's movement. Though her conclusions are open to question, her analysis is nonetheless interesting:

> The Women's Christian Temperance Union was the golden key that unlocked the prison doors of pent-up possibilities. It was the generous liberator, the joyous iconoclast, the discoverer, the the developer of Southern women. It, above all other forces, made it possible for women to occupy the advanced and continually advancing position they now hold.[28]

Caroline Merrick, on the other hand, thought that "the Woman's club was the initial step of whatever progression women have made through subsequent organizations."[29] The essential conclusion seems to be that

southern women came to feminism from many directions.

Clubs and movements provided a valuable training ground for the development not only of ideas, but for the development of practical speaking skills. Both the WCTU and the suffrage association, for example, published materials and conducted workshops on public speaking. Such instruction gave southern women confidence in the public forum from which they had traditionally been barred.

Finally, southern feminist rhetoric was rooted in expediency. Only through political equality of the sexes--i.e., the ballot--could southern women secure "the good" of society. By entering the political fray, these women effected changes in society and in themselves. Theirs was a rhetoric of justice--justice not so much for themselves as for those entrusted to their care. The southern woman's commitment to feminism--and certainly, the number of women who made such a commitment was initially relatively small--came not from the philosophical positions of the Seneca Falls Conference. It derived rather from woman's concern for the welfare of those who had traditionally been her responsibility. In the suffrage movement, however, particularly at the national level, the juncture between northern and southern feminism was effected.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1956), p. 305.

[2]Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, History of Woman Suffrage, 6 vols. (Rochester, N. Y.: Susan B. Anthony, 1891).

[3]Ibid.

[4]Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[5]Francis Butler Simpkins and James Welch Patton, The Women of the Confederacy (Richmond: Garrett and Massie, Inc., 1936), p. 253.

[6]A tabulation of the backgrounds of the State Presidents for a given year supports this conclusion. It is also significant that leadership in women's clubs, temperance societies and other like organizations derived from this class. Their training and leisure time made participation in these causes possible. See Margaret Nell Price, "The Development of Leadership by Southern Women Through Clubs and Organizations" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of North Carolina, 1945), p. 12. Price thought such leadership rather to be "expected."

[7]Simpkins and Patton, Women of the Confederacy, p. 111. See also Stanton et al., History of Woman Suffrage, 2: preface, iii.

[8]Cited in H. Addington Bruce, Woman in the Making of America, rev. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1933), p. 323.

[9]Sallie Sims Southall Cotten, MS dated 14 November 1913, in Cotten family papers in Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

[10]Atlanta Constitution, 15 December, 1893, newspaper clipping in Felton papers, University of Georgia Library.

[11]Scott, The Southern Lady, p. 138.

[12]Lura Craighead, Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs, MS, Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs Collection, Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[13]Price, "The Development of Leadership by Southern Women Through Clubs and Organizations," pp. 169-70.

[14]Cotten, MS dated 14 November 1913, Cotten papers, p. 6.

[15]Birmingham News, undated clipping in Alabama Federation of Women's Clubs folder, Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[16]Price, "The Development of Leadership by Southern Women Through Clubs and Organizations," pp. 169-70.

[17]L. E. Zimmerman, "Kate M. Gordon," in Notable American Women, ed. Edward T. James (Cambridge: Belnap Press, 1971), 2:66-68.

[18]Woman's Journal 38 (13 April 1907): 60, cited in A. Elizabeth Taylor, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Mississippi, 1890-1920," Journal of Mississippi History 30 (1968): 12.

[19]Stanton et al., History of Woman Suffrage 3:157.

[20]Lee Norcross Allen, "Patti Ruffner Jacobs," in Notable American Women 2:266.

[21]Dallas Morning News, 7 November 1893, cited in A. Elizabeth Taylor, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Texas," Journal of Southern History 17 (May 1959): 197.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Caroline Merrick, Old Times in Dixie Land (New York: Grafton Press, 1901), p. 128.

[24]Kenneth R. Johnson, "Kate Gordon and the Woman-Suffrage Movement in the South," Journal of Southern History 38 (August 1972): 365-92.

[25]Amory Dwight Mayo, Southern Women in the Recent Educational Movement in the South, Bureau of Edu-Circular of Information, No. 1, 1892, Whole No. 186 (Washington, 1892), p. 54.

[26]Loyd C. Taylor, Jr., "Lila Meade Valentine: The FFV as Reformer," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 70 (October 1962): 481.

[27]Merrick, Old Times in Dixie Land, p. 171.

[28]Belle Kearney, A Slaveholder's Daughter (New York: The Abbey Press, 1900), p. 118.

[29]Merrick, Old Times in Dixie Land, p. 217.